



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE CAVE OF MACHPELAH.

By SELAH MERRILL, D. D., LL. D.,

Andover, Mass.

These words, by which we mean the burial place of Abraham, are really a quotation from Gen. 23: 9, and it is in this way that the spot in question is first introduced in Bible history. The word "Machpelah" occurs six times, all of them being in the book of Genesis. Abraham wished to purchase "the cave of Machpelah," "which belonged to Ephron," and which was situated "in the end of his field." The line separating Ephron's field from others ran close to the cave where Sarah was to be buried. It does not follow, however, that this line was also the boundary of Machpelah for the word is used with the article always, and refers to a then well known tract (*sadeh*) of land which had more than one owner. A farmer now would speak of "the pasture" or "the meadows," meaning to him and to all connected with him, a certain well known portion of his farm which was thus distinguished from every other portion. The use in English of the terms "the fells," or "the downs" are a pretty good illustration of the use of "the Machpelah" by the people in and about what we now know as Hebron.* How large the tract of land known as "The Machpelah" was we do not know, but evidently it was large rather than small. A portion of it was owned by Ephron and was known as "his field." At one extremity of his land was located the cave which Abraham was to purchase.

Time is here taken to explain this matter for to many readers of the Bible the terms "field of Ephron," "cave of Machpelah," "field of Ephron in Machpelah," "cave of the field of Machpelah," "cave in the field," "end of the field,"

I do not know any authority for making "Machpelah" mean *double*. The root *nâphal*, to which it is sometimes referred, means *to double* in the sense of *folding*. The Hebrew language was capable of expressing a dual object without such a makeshift as that.

not to mention "trees of the field," etc., are not a little puzzling.

The statement in Gen. 23: 17, is fuller and more extended in details,—“the field of Ephron, which is in The Machpelah, . . . the field, and the cave which is in it, and all the trees that are in the field inclosed within its entire boundaries,”—all this passed into the hands of Abraham. Instead of being a puzzle, the statement is very clear;—there was a tract known as “The Machpelah.” In it Ephron owned a field, and in one end of his field there was a cave.

We are sometimes annoyed by the lack of definiteness which we think we discover in Hebrew writers. In not a few cases, however, there is an apparent effort to give such specific and minute details that there can be no possible misapprehension as to the facts. Of this the transaction between Abraham and Ephron is a good illustration. The following particulars are mentioned which I will enumerate at the risk of slight repetitions:—(1) Ephron was a Hittite living among Hittites. (2) He was the son of Zohar also a Hittite. (3) He had a field in the tract called “The Machpelah,” and in the extreme end of his field there was a cave. (4) In every case but one where Machpelah is mentioned it is described as “before or facing Mamre.” (5) Pains are taken to state that it was in the land of Canaan. (6) Abraham bought “the cave with the field” (49: 30; 50: 13). (7) He bought also “all the trees that were within the boundary line of Ephron’s land.” (8) The price asked and paid was four hundred shekels of silver that was current with the merchant. (9) All this was done in the presence of many witnesses. (10) Moreover when the book of Genesis received its final touches, Mamre is explained, for the benefit of later readers, as being then called Hebron (23: 19). Certainly the details here are ample.

The words “before or facing Mamre” are interesting, because Abraham was living in an oak grove on land belonging to a great man named Mamre. In the ten times that this word occurs it is used as the name of a place eight times and as the name of a man twice. Caves and tombs were nearly always in the side of a hill, and “facing Mamre” may imply

that the cave that Abraham wanted was within his sight on the opposite side of the valley from where he was.

Two expressions deserve notice:—Abraham bought “the cave with the field,” and also “all the trees that were within the boundary line of Ephron’s land.” Had there been no specification of the kind, Ephron might have said to Abraham “you bought the land but you did not buy the cave or the trees that are on it.” In that country it is necessary in transferring land to specify the trees, even a single tree if there be but one, or a spring of water, or whatever else might be of advantage to the owner. I knew a remarkable case of this kind at Jerusalem, a case that was in the courts for two or more years, where the trees on the land were not specified in the deed of it, and the purchaser (a foreigner residing in the country) claimed them as his; the man of whom he bought the land also claimed them, and the courts decided in favor of the latter. If in some matters Hebrew statements are vague, this case of Abraham and Ephron shows that they can be scrupulously definite. The Jews are noted for being poor in topography, but in money transactions they are surprisingly specific.

Time is a far greater destroyer of ancient landmarks than a wicked neighbor (Deut. 27: 17), and after the lapse of thirty-six centuries it would be a marvel if we were still able to point to any spot in or about Hebron and say this was “The Machpelah,” this was Ephron’s field, this was the cave which Abraham bought for a burial place. This we are not able to do. At the same time with regard to the cave of Machpelah there are very strong reasons for supposing that the precise locality has been preserved. The place pointed out to-day has been handed down from the beginning of our era. In all that time there has been no change. Josephus says that the tombs were marked by beautiful monuments,—as if the nation had taken pride in the preservation,—and gives no hint that their identity had ever been questioned. For the period preceding the birth of Christ the conditions of the country were such that a tradition of this kind would be much more creditable than it could possibly be since that event. But since that event there is no reason for doubt;

the most skeptical yield assent. Hence in the preceding period there ought to be absolute certainty. In this instance there is perfect agreement between Jewish, Mohammedan, and Christian traditions. The case cannot be made stronger than it is by the quotation of the views of few or many scholars, still the judgment of Dr. Robinson may be given as a sample, who says,—“We may rest with confidence in the view that the remarkable external structure of the haram is indeed the work of Jewish hands, erected long before the destruction of the nation, around the sepulchre of their revered progenitors, “The friend of God and his descendants.” (2: 78).

The remark of Robinson should be confined to the certainty of the identification, since as to the age of the structure a question has arisen in recent years, which a few writers consider to be yet an open one. All are agreed that it could not possibly have been erected since the time of Herod the Great. Scholars are divided as to whether the date of its construction should be placed during the reign of Herod or at a much earlier period. Any person acquainted with both would say that the work at Hebron resembles in general the massive stone work in the substructures at Jerusalem, a portion of which has been demonstrated to be the work of Herod. Were this a complete statement of the facts, the case would be ended. A careful examination of the two, however, reveals differences which must be taken into our account: (1) The faces of the stones at Jerusalem are very rough while those at Hebron are smooth. (2) The sunk border on the edge of the stones, the marginal draft popularly called “bevellings,” is not so deep on the Hebron stones as on those at Jerusalem. We have also another important fact, that in the ruins of Hyrcanus's palace at Arak El Emir, east of the Jordan, which dates from 180 B. C., there are great stones of Jewish origin nearly or quite identical as to the character of the work upon them with the stones at Hebron. Here are far better means of comparison for the matter of dates than the Jerusalem Herodian work.

Besides the facts now mentioned there are other considerations which make it very improbable that the structure at

Hebron belongs to the time of Herod the Great. (1) Hebron belonged to Idumea and Herod with all his building did not do much in that part of his dominions. (2) A special effort apparently was made by Josephus to specify all the important works of Herod and the structure at Hebron is not among them. (3) Had this structure been a small affair there would be a reason for its omission, but it was one of the finest in the land, and the probability that it would be mentioned, supposing its builder was Herod, increases with the magnificence of the work. (4) The name of the builder is omitted, and the probability of its being omitted increases as the date of its erection recedes from the time of Herod the Great. (5) On the supposition that the Hebron monuments were built by Herod, it is contrary to all that we know of Josephus for him to have spoken of them as he does. He says,—“The monuments of Abraham and his sons are still shown at Hebron, of the most beautiful marble and of exquisite workmanship” (Wars. iv. 9, 7). The inference is that they had not been erected in his day nor during the reign of Herod, but that they had been in existence as a national memorial for a long period.

But if the claim that they are Herodian work is not a valid one, to what period can their erection be assigned? The fact must be borne in mind that two hundred years before our era the Jews at Arak El Emir erected precisely similar work. The Hebron monuments could have been built after the return from the captivity; but to this view the impoverished state of the nation would, as Dean Stanley suggests, be a serious objection, and he is inclined to refer them to the period of the kings and “to none so likely as the sovereigns to whom they are ascribed by Jewish and Mohammedan tradition,—David or Solomon” (Jewish church, 2. 537). Unless indubitable proof can be brought forward to show that they are of the Herodian age, a thing it seems to me impossible, we have a right to ascribe them to an early period as the only date appropriate to Josephus’s words, and to consider that generation after generation previous to the birth of Christ had preserved and guarded them with pious care.

VISITORS TO THE MOSK.

Several private persons claim to have entered the Mosk, but the evidence for their having done so is very meagre. If one or two of these have actually seen the inside of the building, they have added nothing to our knowledge of it. The list of those who have been allowed to enter the sacred enclosure is a small one, comprising six different parties. The first was the Prince of Wales in 1862; after him, in order, James Fergusson in 1864; the Marquis of Bute in 1866; the Crown Prince of Prussia, since known as Emperor Frederick III. in 1868; two sons, Albert and George, of the Prince of Wales, in April 1882; and General Lew Wallace in November 1882. With each of these persons, except Mr. Fergusson who entered alone, there was a small party of friends, so that the place has been pretty thoroughly examined.

The first plan made of the Mosk was that in A. P. Stanley's "*Sermons in the East*," (8vo. Lond. 1863); given also in James Fergusson's "*The Holy Sepulchre and the Temple at Jerusalem*," (Lond. 1865); and it is found in the appendix to Stanley's "*Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*," first series, (American edition, p. 542). A later plan is found in the *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund*, October 1882, from notes and measurements made during the visit of the Princes Albert and George in April of that year. Both plans are good and reliable, but the one in Stanley's works (as indicated) gives a clearer idea of the arrangement of the entrance, rooms, and tombs, than that found in the *Quarterly Statement*.

The interior of the Mosk is considered so sacred by the Mohammedans that a special order from the Sultan is necessary for Christians to enter it. I scarcely need to add that such permission is seldom granted and only on the rarest occasions. The circumstances were all favorable to our visiting the place unmolested as we had an escort of twenty-six soldiers besides the Consular guard. The Governor of Jerusalem and Palestine accompanied us. There were in the party two ladies, Mrs. J. M. Lane of Crawfordsville, Indiana, and the wife of the present writer, and these are the only

Christian women that have entered the Mosk for many centuries. Not only were our persons protected from harm but every facility for carefully examining the interior was afforded us. The custodian was exceedingly dignified and almost solemn in his look and manner, still he was attentive and formally courteous.

The Mosk, when one is actually within it, does not appear large and there is nothing about it that is imposing. In fact an air of dilapidation is apparent, as for instance in the ornamentation on the walls and the inclosures of the several tombs. On the contrary the Oriental rugs with which the floor is covered are some of the richest that I have ever seen. The impression of great size is lost perhaps by the fact that the interior is divided into separate rooms as I will explain. The building is entered from the southwest corner and the first few steps from the street are those which travelers are allowed to touch or stand upon. The flight ascends to the extreme southeast corner, turns then a right angle and goes north up to the level of the floor of the Mosk. This passage is lined all the way by massive stones of Jewish workmanship. The inclosing walls, I have not yet mentioned, are 200 by 115 feet (later measurements make them 197 by 111 feet), and the inclosed space is divided cross-ways into four sections, one of which is an open court, and the largest which occupies about one-third of the entire space, was originally a church. From the head of the stairs where the floor of the Mosk is reached, we pass first into the open court, turn directly to the left, that is to the south, and immediately enter the porch of the church. Counting the open space as one section, this porch will be the second of the four mentioned. Here in small rooms are the tombs of Abraham on the right and of Sarah on the left. With our faces still to the south we enter the church (the third cross section), where, also in separate rooms, are the tombs of Isaac on the right and that of Rebecca on the left. In the north cross section, north of the open court, are the tombs of Jacob and Leah;—Jacob's tomb being on the same side of the Mosk as those of Abraham and Isaac. The tomb of Joseph is in a room by itself on the west side beyond the old Jewish wall, and evidently a much later addition.

The reader is asked to remember that the six tombs are arranged on the floor of the Mosk in the form of a parallelogram at equal distances from each other. They are protected by rooms, as I have said, having doors or barred iron gates, so that one, if permitted to do so, can enter and walk around the tomb. I speak of "tombs" because that is the common word; each tomb, however, is a cenotaph four feet wide, eight feet long, and nearly eight feet high, with rounded tops. They are covered with beautiful and costly pieces of oriental silk richly embroidered with gold, those on the men's tombs being green, and those on the women's bright rose color. These are the gifts of different Sultans or other wealthy devotees of the Moslem faith.

These modern conventional cenotaphs, it hardly need be said, have no connection with the actual places of burial of the patriarchs. They with their wives were buried in a cave in the rock which is beneath the floor of the Mosk. To this cave there are in what we call the church, two entrances, one near its south wall and the other near its north wall about where that joins Abraham's tomb. Over the former is a heavy stone slab clamped down with iron bands which are worn smooth by the treading of feet upon them, showing that they have not been removed for generations. The Governor said that he could order the stone removed but the consequences to himself would be disastrous, meaning of course from the government at Constantinople. The entrance near Abraham's tomb was open. The hole was about eighteen inches in diameter and in it a light was suspended so that by getting down on our hands and knees we could see the chamber below. The floor was of earth covered with small loose stones, the walls were the native rock, and in one side of the chamber there were openings to a cave. This rock wall with a rough opening to a cave within it, is in no way unlike hundreds of similar places in Palestine.

What I have now described is all that any visitor has seen of the cave of Machpelah. I find the impression prevailing in some minds that Dean Stanley actually entered the cave. On the contrary he saw no more than we did.

The rooms in which the different tombs stand can be en-

tered by doors or gates as I have explained. Previous to our visit the gates to Sarah's tomb had not been opened; but by a little pressure we were allowed to enter even that most sacred inclosure.

It has been my aim to make the account of my visit to this interesting spot as brief as possible. Many more details could be given, but the main facts are now before the reader. In reply to questions that are frequently asked I will say, (1) That some day these caves will be entered and their secrets so long kept from the world will be fully made known. (2) Whatever else may be found in them I am almost certain that they contain no mummies. The limestone hills of Judea are wholly different from the hot dry sands of Egypt. The rock is not firm and moisture percolates and penetrates everywhere so that wood, iron, or human bodies however carefully prepared, cannot resist decay. This fact I have often urged whenever I have found persons who were over sanguine as to the revelations to be expected from the opening of these secret chambers beneath the Mosk at Hebron.